



## **Manipulating Public Opinion: The Why and The How**

Edward L. Bernays

*American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 33, Issue 6 (May, 1928), 958-971.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9602%28192805%2933%3A6%3C958%3AMPOTWA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6>

# MANIPULATING PUBLIC OPINION: THE WHY AND THE HOW

---

EDWARD L. BERNAYS  
New York City

---

## ABSTRACT

Public opinion, narrowly defined, is the thought of a society at a given time toward a given object; broadly conceived, it is the power of the group to sway the larger public in its attitude. Public opinion can be manipulated, but in teaching the public how to ask for what it wants the manipulator is safeguarding the public against his own possible aggressiveness. The method of the experimental psychologist is not as effective in the study of public opinion in the broad sense as is that of introspective psychology. To create and to change public opinion it is necessary to understand human motives, to know what special interests are represented by a given population, and to realize the function and limitations of the physical organs of approach to the public, such as the radio, the platform, the movie, the letter, the newspaper, etc. If the general principles of swaying public opinion are understood, a technique can be developed which, with the correct appraisal of the specific problem and the specific audience, can and has been used effectively in such widely different situations as changing the attitude of whites toward Negroes in America, changing the buying habits of American women from felt hats to velvet, silk, and straw hats, changing the impression which the American electorate has of its President, introducing new musical instruments, and a variety of others. Group adherence is essential in changing the attitudes of the public. Authoritative and influential groups may become important channels of reaching the larger public. Ideas and situations must be made impressive and dramatic in order to overcome the inertia of established traditions and prejudices.

---

Public opinion is subject to a variety of influences that develop and alter its views on nearly every phase of life today. Religion, science, art, commerce, industry are in a state of motion. The inertia of society and institutions is constantly combated by the activity of individuals with strong convictions and desires.

Civilization, however, is limited by inertia. We repeat constantly our beliefs and habits until they become a cumulative retrogressive force.

Our attitude toward social intercourse, toward economics, toward national and international politics continues past attitudes and strengthens them under the force of tradition. Comstock lets his mantle of proselytizing morality fall on a willing Sumner; Penrose lets fall his mantle on Butler; Carnegie his on Schwab; and so

*ad infinitum*. Opposing this traditional acceptance of existing ideas is an active public opinion that has been directed consciously into movement against inertia. Public opinion was made or changed formerly by tribal chiefs, by kings, by religious leaders. Today the privilege of attempting to sway public opinion is everyone's. It is one of the manifestations of democracy that anyone may try to convince others and to assume leadership on behalf of his own thesis.

Narrowly defined, public opinion represents the thought of any given group of society at any given time toward a given object. Looked at from the broadest standpoint, it is the power of the group to sway the larger public in its attitude toward ideas.

New ideas, new precedents, are continually striving for a place in the scheme of things. Very often these ideas are socially sound and constructive and put an end to worn-out notions. Usually they are minority ideas, for naturally, but regrettably, majority ideas are most often old ones. Public opinion is slow and reactionary, and does not easily accept new ideas.

The innovator, the leader, the special pleader for new ideas, has through necessity developed a new technique—the psychology of public persuasion. Through the application of this new psychology he is able to bring about changes in public opinion that will make for the acceptance of new doctrines, beliefs, and habits. The manipulation of the public mind, which is so marked a characteristic of society today, serves a social purpose. This manipulation serves to gain acceptance for new ideas. It is a species of education in that it presents new problems for study and consideration to the public, and leaves it free to approve or reject them. Never before was so broad a section of the general public so subjected to facts on both sides of so many problems of life. Honest education and honest propaganda have much in common. There is this dissimilarity: Education attempts to be disinterested, while propaganda is frankly partisan.

What are the various motives for the manipulation of public opinion? They are the motives which dominate man in our society today. The basic instincts of self-preservation, procreation, and love are the more complex social motives. People attempt to sway

other people for social motives—ethical, philanthropic, educational—for political, for international, for economic, and for motives of personal ambition.

From a social motive a special pleader may wage a campaign against tuberculosis or cancer, or to raise the standard of business ethics, or to secure support for a philanthropic institution. From the political standpoint, he may strive to make the public accept the idea of specific efficiency or economy in government. Internationally a special pleader may be seeking peace among the nations. Or in economics he may try to create a new market for an old product, or a market for a new product. Personal ambition to succeed, to convince others, to win recognition are basic motives that have activated most of the leaders of the world.

There is, of course, one danger inherent in this essential machinery of dealing with public opinion. It is a danger so grave that editors and publicists shy from the subject rather than discuss it.

Where shall we end, they say, in this welter of conflicting ideas? What will come from this chaos? And cannot the man who has manipulated his public opinion and won it to his side misuse it for his own purpose? Possibly he can. There are Ku Klux Klans, there are Mussolinis, there are tyrannies of every sort; but a public that learns more and more how to express itself will learn more and more how to overthrow tyranny of every sort. So that every man who teaches the public how to ask for what it wants is at the same time teaching the public how to safeguard itself against his own possible tyrannous aggressiveness.

How is public opinion manipulated? The technique of measuring and recording human relations has not been perfected as has the technique of measuring physical relations. No Bureau of Standards with micrometers exists for the expert on human or public relations. Experimental psychology has provided some yardsticks, but they are not clearly defined and are more easily applied to one field of manipulated public opinion—advertising—than to the broader field of propaganda or public relations.

It is comparatively simple to test out the comparative efficacy of a page advertisement with white space and an advertisement which is printed solidly, or of a colored billboard and a black-and-

white billboard. But the method of the experimental psychological laboratories hardly meets the requirements of the technician who deals with public opinion in the broad.

Here the specialist in swaying public opinion avails himself of the findings of introspective psychology. He knows in general the basic emotions and desires of the public he intends to reach, and their prevalence and intensity. Analysis is the first step in dealing with a problem that concerns the public. He employs the technique of statistics, field-surveying, and the various methods of eliciting facts and opinions in examining both the public, and the idea or product he seeks to propagandize.

Diagnostic ability enters into this question of manipulating public opinion; a diagnostic ability that is perhaps a greater essential in manipulating public opinion effectively today than it will be later, when the technique has been more scientifically developed.

Sociology also contributes to his technique. The group cleavages of society, the importance of group leaders, and the habits of their followers are part of the technical background of his work. He has methods adapted to educating the public to new ideas, to articulating minority ideas and strengthening them, to making latent majority ideas active, to making an old principle apply to a new idea, to substituting ideas by changing *clichés*, to overcoming prejudices, to making a part stand for the whole, and to creating events and circumstances that stand for his ideas. He must know the physical organs of approach to his public: the radio, the lecture platform, the motion picture, the letter, the advertisement, the pamphlet, the newspaper. He must know how an idea can be translated into terms that fit any given form of communication, and that his public can understand.

An interesting experiment is being conducted in New York in an endeavor to chart these human relationships along scientific lines. The first study of this group was to trace the development and functioning of given attitudes toward given subjects, such as religion, sex, race, morality, nationalism, internationalism, and so forth. The conclusion was established that attitudes were often created by a circumstance or circumstances of dramatic moment.

Very often the propagandist is called upon to create a circum-

stance that will eventuate in the desired reaction on the part of the public he is endeavoring to reach.

So much for principle; how, in practice, does this manipulating process work out?

Take the question of the fight against lynching, Jim Crowism, and the civil discriminations against the Negro below the Mason and Dixon line. How was public opinion manipulated after the war to bring about a change, or at least a modification for the better, in the public attitude toward the Negro? The National Association for the Improvement of the Colored People had the fight in hand. As a matter of technique they decided to dramatize the year's campaign in an annual convention which would center attention at one time and at one place upon the ideas they stood for and upon the men who stood for these ideas. The purpose of this convention was to build up for the question and for its proponents the support of all those who would necessarily learn of the conference.

The first step in the technique settled, the next step was to decide how to make it most effective.

Should it be held in the North, South, West, or East? Since the purpose was to affect the entire country, the association was advised to hold it in the South. For, said the propagandist, a point of view on a southern question, emanating from a southern center, would have a greater force of authority than the same point of view issuing from any other locality, particularly when that point of view was at odds with the traditional southern point of view. Atlanta was chosen.

The third step was to surround the conference with people who were stereotypes for ideas that carried weight all over the country. The support of leaders of diversified groups was sought. Telegrams and letters were dispatched to leaders of religious, political, social, and educational groups, asking for their point of view on the purpose of the conference. But in addition to these group leaders of national standing it was particularly important from the technical standpoint to secure the opinions of group leaders of the South, even from Atlanta itself, to emphasize the purposes of the conference to the entire public. There was one group in Atlanta which could be approached. A group of ministers, on the basis of Chris-

tianity, had been bold enough to come out for a greater interracial amity. This group was approached and agreed to co-operate in the conference.

Here, then, were main factors of a created circumstance; a conference to be held in a southern city, with the participation of national leaders and especially with the participation of southern gentlemen.

The scene had been set. The acts of the play followed logically.

And the event ran off as scheduled. The program itself followed the general scheme. Negroes and white men from the South on the same platform, expressing the same point of view.

A dramatic element spotlighted here and there. A national leader from Massachusetts, descendant of an Abolitionist, agreeing in principle and in practice with a Baptist preacher from the South.

If the radio had been in effect, the whole country would have heard and been moved by the speeches and the principles expressed.

But the public read the words and the ideas in the press of the country. For the event had been created of such important component parts as to awaken interest throughout the country and to gain support for its ideas even in the South.

The editorials in the southern press, reflecting the public opinion of their communities, showed that the subject had become one of interest to the editors because of the participation by southern leaders.

The event naturally gave the Association itself substantial weapons with which to appeal to an increasingly wider circle. Further expansion of these thoughts was attained by mailing reports, letters, and other documents to selected groups of the public. Who can tell what homes, what smoking-rooms in Pullman cars and hotels, what schoolrooms, what churches, what Rotary and Kiwanis clubs responded to the keynote struck by these men and women speaking in Atlanta!

As for the practical results, the immediate one was a change in the minds of many southern editors who realized that the question at issue was not an emotional one, but a discussable one; and that this point of view was immediately reflected to their readers. As for the further results, these are hard to measure with a slide rule.

The conference had its effect in changing the attitude of southerners; it had its definite effect in building up the racial consciousness and solidarity of the Negroes; it had its effect in bringing to the South in a very dramatic way a realization of the problems it was facing, with the consequent desire among its leaders to face them more ably. It is evident that the decline in lynching is an effect of this and other efforts of the association.

But let us touch another field, that of industry. The millinery industry two years ago was hanging by a thread. The felt hat had arrived and was crowding out the manufacture of all those kinds of hats and hat ornaments upon which an industry and thousands of men and women employed in it had subsisted. What to do to prevent débâcle?

A public-relations counsel was called in by the association of the millinery trade, both wholesale and retail. He analyzed the hat situation and found that the hats made by the manufacturer could roughly be classified into six groups: the lace hat, the ribbon hat, the straw and feather-trimmed and other ornamented hats, and so on.

The public relations counsel tabulated the elements of the social structure that dominated the hat-using habits of women. These he found comprised four classes: First, the society leader, the woman at the fountain-head of style who made the fashion by her approval. Second, there was the style expert, the writer or publicist who enunciated fashion facts and information. Third was the artist, who was needed to give artistic approval to the styles. Fourth, and not unimportant either, were beautiful women to wear the embodied ideas sanctioned by the other groups. The problem, then, was to bring into juxtaposition all of these groups, and preferably at one time and at one place, before an audience of those most concerned, the buyers of hats.

With that as a working plan of how to shape events to bring about the desired result, the remainder of the work was simply filling in the outline with real people.

A committee of prominent artists was organized to choose the six most beautiful girls in New York to wear, in a series of six tableaux, the six most beautiful hats of the six style classifications at a



fashion fête to be held at the Hotel Astor. Heyworth Campbell, art editor of the Condé Nast publications, was head of the committee. Leo Lentelli, the sculptor; Charles Dana Gibson; Henry Creange, the art director; Ray Greenleaf, joined the group and toiled mightily to choose from among hundreds of applicants the six most desirable candidates.

In the meantime there was organized a style committee of distinguished American women who, on a basis of their interest in the development of an American industry, were willing to add the authority of their names to the idea. And, simultaneously, there was organized a style committee consisting of Carmel White, of *Vogue*, and other prominent fashion authorities who were willing to support the idea because of its style value. The girls had been chosen. Now they chose the hats.

On the evening of the fashion show everything had been arranged for the dramatic juxtaposition of all of these elements for molding public opinion. The girls—beautiful girls—in their lovely hats and costumes paraded on the running-board before an audience of the entire trade.

The news of the event affected not only the buying habits of the onlookers, but also of the women throughout the country. The story of the event was flashed to the consumer by the news service of her newspaper as well as by the advertisement of her favorite store. Broadsides went to the millinery buyer from the manufacturer, and the rotogravure of the lovely women in the lovely hats went to the consumer in the smallest town. In ten days the industry was humming. One manufacturer stated that whereas before the show he had not sold any large trimmed hats, after it he sold thousands. The felt hat was put to rout; not by Paris immediately, but by the women in this country, who quite rightly accepted the leadership of the fashion groups who had created the circumstances as they are outlined here.

If large trimmed hats could put to rout the small felt *cloche*, then perhaps velvet could also make its inroads upon the style habits of twenty-three million women. Analysis showed that the velvet manufacturers could not start their fashion here. Fashion came from Paris. That Lyons, home of silk manufactories, and Paris,

home of *couturières* and milliners, influenced the American markets, both of manufacture and distribution, there was no doubt. The attack had to be made at the source. It was determined to substitute purpose for chance, and to utilize the regular sources for fashion distribution, and to influence the public from the sources. A velvet fashion service, openly supported by the manufacturers, was organized. Its first function was to establish contact with the Lyons manufactories and the Paris *couturières* to find out what they were doing, to encourage them to act on behalf of velvet, and to help in the proper exploitation of their wares. An intelligent Parisian was enlisted into the work. It was he who visited Lanvin and Worth, Agnes and Patou, etc., and induced them to use velvet in their gowns and their hats. It was he who arranged for the distinguished Countess this or Duchess that to wear the hat or the gown. And as for the presentation of the idea to the public, the American buyer or the American woman of fashion was simply shown the velvet creations in the atelier of the dressmaker or the milliner. She bought the velvet because she liked it and because it was in fashion. The editor of the American magazine and the fashion reporter of the American newspaper, likewise subjected to the actual (though created) circumstance, reflected it in her news, which, in turn, subjected the consumer and the buyer here to the same influences. The result was that what was at first a trickle of velvet became a flood. A demand was slowly being created, not fortuitously, but consciously. A big department store, aiming to be a style leader, advertised velvet gowns and hats on the authority of French *couturières* and quoted original cables received from them. The echo of the new style note resounded from hundreds of department stores throughout the country who wanted to be style leaders too.

Broadside followed broadside, the mail followed the cables, and the American woman traveler appeared before ship news photographers in velvet gown and hat.

The created circumstances had their effect. Velvet was the fashion. "Fickle fashion had veered to velvet," was one newspaper comment. And the industry in South Manchester and Patterson again kept thousands busy.

The fields in which public opinion can be manipulated to conform to a desired result are as varied as life itself.

In politics, for instance, in order to humanize an individual: When President Coolidge was running for office the question was brought up of how the hitherto unknown personality of the man in the White House could be projected to the country.

It was suggested that an event in which the most human groups would be brought into juxtaposition with the president would have the desired result. Actors and actresses were invited to breakfast with Mr. Coolidge at the White House. The country felt that a man in the White House who could laugh with Al Jolson and the Dolly sisters was not frigid and unsympathetic.

An interesting example of international propaganda is the campaign that was waged to make 110,000,000 people in America realize that a small country on the Baltic was not simply a spot on the map. Lithuania was reflected to this country in its drama, music, literature, habits, economics, and agriculture. The printed word and events created to symbolize facts and ideas made America aware of the conditions in Lithuania and of its just aspirations. Ignorance was dissipated and sympathies strengthened to a point where these feelings became translated into action. Lithuania received economic aid and political recognition.

From Lithuania to silks is a long distance. And yet the same technique of creating circumstance which freed the Lithuanians helped to create a market for more beautiful silks. Although the silks made in America were inspired by France, the American woman refused to recognize their style of beauty until Paris had put its stamp of approval on them. That was the problem: to develop public opinion to accept the idea that American silk was artistic, and to use French authority in accomplishing that end. The silks were authentic in beauty, workmanship, and style. A plan was developed to have the silks exhibited in the Louvre, because that stands for the idea of accredited beauty in the American mind. It was suggested that the American ambassador officially open the exhibition, as a fitting recognition of America's leadership in the field. He felt legitimately that he was doing his duty in encouraging American industry. Leading men and women in the French

capital were invited to the exhibition, with the consequence that by cable, by motion picture, by mail, the American public was soon made conscious of the fact that its own silk had received the recognition of the French art authorities. It must be good, therefore! And the best index of the success of the plan was the fact that the leading cities of the United States vied with each other for the honor of exhibiting what the Louvre had shown, whereas before they had regarded the productions of America's looms simply as so much merchandise.

As for the companies interested in gaining acceptance for new inventions, how can they overcome the inertia of the public without applying some stimulus to public opinion? The panatrope, an instrument which is the result of years of painstaking experimentation in the electrical and acoustical laboratories of four great corporations—the Westinghouse, the General Electric, the Radio Corporation, and the Brunswick-Balke-Collender companies—was perfected and ready for general sale. A definite technique must be used to launch it to affect the minds of millions who presumably are much more interested in football scores and Lindbergh than in a new mechanical principle in music-making machinery. Group adherence is the fulcrum around which broad acceptance for new ideas can most rapidly be moved. Certain small groups are important enough to influence the attitudes of large groups that overlap them. First were the music lovers and critics, whose acceptance of this new idea carried weight with the average buyer of musical instruments, who without their aid could not formulate an opinion as to the quality of this machine. Scientists were selected to join the committee of sponsorship that had been formed. Their support of the idea meant to the public that it was scientifically correct. Third was the stereotype of the Metropolitan Opera House, which stands in the public mind for achievement in music. It was decided to gather all of these elements together at a single dramatic event in a place which should further symbolize the idea. The patrons of music were chosen: Mrs. Vincent Astor and Mr. Otto Kahn joined the committee. The scientists, John Hays Hammond and Doctor Alfred N. Goldsmith, were happy to give their authority to the idea and joined the committee. Benjamino Gigli, a tenor of the Metro-

politan Opera Company, gave the artistic stamp of approval to the event. And quite naturally Aeolian Hall, the nucleus of music, was chosen as the place at which the event was to be held. A representative audience responded to the invitation. The event was important and interesting and took a prominent place among the competitive ideas and events of the day. The consequence was that the Panatrope immediately received acceptance as an important musical instrument. Without the definite procedure of implanting a new idea in the public mind, the inertia of society might have retarded the acceptance of this invention in the musical field for many years.

Public opinion may be marshaled for or against even salad dressings. Here the American's sense of humor was made the basis of a plan to make large numbers of the public receptive to a new product. Reciprocal relations between the palate and the palette in terms of harmonies in oil were made the basis of a picturesque joke. The public, more seriously occupied with Chinese revolutions and Nicaraguan questions, responded immediately to the idea that art galleries are fitting places, not only for still-lives of salads as painted by famous artists, but also of examples of art in cooking. Beautifully prepared salads dedicated to famous artists were therefore displayed underneath canvases painted by famous artists. The exhibit was colorful and spirited and had its effect in focusing attention on salad dressing. That newspapers offer space in their columns and devote time and attention to such an exhibit is not the relevant point. What is relevant is that an idea may strike the fancy and arrest the attention of hundreds of thousands of people, and as such can be communicated to them through every form of thought-transmission of which modern business avails itself.

Analysis of the problem and its causes is the first step toward shaping the public mind on any subject. Occasionally the analysis points to a basic change in the policy of a manufacturer.

Take the case of a certain vegetable shortening. There was no sale of this food product in certain sections of the public. A careful research was made. It was found that orthodox Jews would not buy it because it did not conform to the dietary requirements of their religion. The manufacturer altered the product itself to make

it conform to the dietary strictures of this market. The problem that lay before him then was to acquaint this sector of the population with the change. This problem was handled with success. The stamp of approval was given the product by religious leaders and special dietary officials. Institutions such as hospitals, that were known to conform scrupulously to the dietary rules, were asked to convince themselves of the character and quality of the product. Their approval bore weight with the thousands of people who respected their authority.

One method of changing people's ideas has been often used, and that is to substitute new ideas for old by changing *clichés*. The evacuation hospitals during the war came in for a certain amount of criticism because of the summary way in which they handled their wounded. The name was changed to "evacuation post," thus changing the *cliché*. No one expected more than adequate emergency treatment of an institution so named. This story, which was told to me by a reliable authority, is a clear illustration of the principle.

Before 1925 few people in America felt that industry had any connection with art. Few manufacturers thought seriously of the artistic ramifications of their work. A small group of people, however, realizing the importance of this phase of American industry, approached Herbert Hoover, secretary of commerce, and suggested that he appoint a commission to visit and report on the International Exposition of Industrial and Decorative Arts at Paris in 1925. I was appointed associate commissioner. We appointed about 150 delegates from different industries to study the exposition at Paris. A report was made. Industry itself became conscious of the new *cliché* of themselves that had been made in this way. Since then a determined progress toward authentic beauty has been made in large industries throughout the country.

Soap found a new market and a new use when the public-relations counsel of a large soap corporation called upon the desire for beauty of a strong minority of the population and introduced soap as a medium for sculpture as a pastime for children and as an educational aid for schools. An annual contest has been held for several years in a leading art gallery, and exhibits of the works of

thousands of professional and amateur sculptors shown in the leading galleries and museums of the country.

Instantaneous attention was given to the financial articles of W. Z. Ripley, asking for full publicity in financial reports of stock corporations. He articulated an idea that was latent in the minds of a large majority of the public. The next step was to convert this new awareness into action. Public opinion, aroused by Ripley, forced the New York Stock Exchange to take action.

Occasionally the manipulation of the public mind entails the removal of a prejudice. Prejudices are often the application of old taboos to new conditions. They are illogical, emotional, and hampering to progress. Take, for example, the feeling that used to exist against margarine. In its early stages of manufacture in this country, margarine was, like as not, made of impure animal matter. Its state of wholesomeness was not apparent. Today margarine is made of pure vegetable or animal ingredients that have been scientifically determined upon as wholesome and passed as pure by the government. Yet the prejudice carried over, and a difficult campaign is still being waged to remove this prejudice. Correspondence is carried on with officials and leaders in the field of medicine, hygiene, and dietetics, and the result of their manifold study given out to the public. The prejudice remained long after its cause had been altered.

This is an age of mass production. In the mass production of materials a broad technique has been developed and applied to their distribution. In this age, too, there must be a technique for the mass distribution of ideas. Public opinion can be moved, directed, and formed by such a technique. But at the core of this great heterogeneous body of public opinion is a tenacious will to live, to progress, to move in the direction of ultimate social and individual benefit. He who seeks to manipulate public opinion must always heed it.